

DOE's Paducah mission called more than technical

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Jennifer Woodard, the U.S. Department of Energy's Paducah site lead, was the featured speaker at Thursday morning's Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce Power in Partnership breakfast. Woodard has worked at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant since 1993 in a number of capacities, working first for a contractor and then as a federal employee.

The U.S. Department of Energy not only has a technical mission to clean up its Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant site, but a community mission as well.

That was the message delivered by Jennifer Woodard, DOE's Paducah site lead, at Thursday morning's Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce Power in Partnership breakfast.

Woodard provided an overview of the plant's operation, its history, workforce, and ways in which the DOE interacts with the Paducah area community.

"We have a great many challenges to deal with because of the varying missions we've had throughout the years," Woodard said. "They can only be accomplished by the competent and experienced workforce we have."

About 1,500 workers are currently at the Paducah site, according to Woodard. While the actual number of federal (DOE) employees is small -- fewer than 15 -- most were either born and raised in the area or have been in Paducah for over 20 years, like Woodard herself.

"That provides us a great deal of interaction with our community and with understanding what the plant provides from a technical standpoint and from a community standpoint," Woodard said.

That interaction includes working with a Citizens Advisory Board, which provides advice and recommendations on the ongoing plant cleanup, and meeting with community leaders on a regular basis "to make sure we have a good understanding of how the community can help us and we can help the community," Woodard said.

By calling for a show of hands, Woodard demonstrated how many people in the audience are impacted - directly or indirectly - by the Paducah site operations.

"That's the reason our community leaders support us so much in funding issues and the work we do," she said. "Because a job lost isn't just one job. It's all the lives you touch that are around you ... and we recognize that."

Employees from DOE and its contractors are also involved in community events like helping stock area food banks and outreach efforts in local schools to promote learning in science and math.

The PGDP was involved in enriching of uranium for 61 years from 1952 to 2013. Until the 1970s, the plant enriched uranium for nuclear national security, and in the '70s for nuclear power plants, according to Woodard.

"So, the mission changed but the process didn't, and the people at the site continued doing their jobs."

In 1998 the uranium enrichment process was privatized and continued at the site until 2013. In 2014, the site was returned to DOE control and a primary cleanup contractor, Fluor Federal Services, was hired.

Last year, for the first time, the DOE began offering public tours of the Paducah site, and there have been 500 visitors from 15 states.

In May, Paducah will host a meeting of Citizens Advisory Board chairs from DOE sites around the country.

The Citizens Advisory Board also works with the Paducah Convention and Visitors Bureau to help sell Paducah, Woodard said.

"We talk about the plant, and we talk about the cleanup, but one of the things we want to do is sell Paducah as a community," she said.

"The message I hope you heard is it's really about relationships," Woodard said. "We have a technical thing to do, but the reality is we're here for the long haul. We have relationships in this community, and we honor them."